



---

NANCY HANKS LINCOLN PUBLIC LIBRARY  
Historical Book Collection

---

The text of this book remains unchanged from the original published version. It should be noted that some comments or words in this edition might be culturally insensitive to certain readers. Views and words of the author or authors are theirs alone and not of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln Public Library. Certain words or slang used in the past had different cultural meanings at the time and might not mean the same thing today.

Publishing and spelling errors remain unchanged from the original versions. All text images were reproduced exactly without changes to the existing material.

---

# **Personal Experiences**

**During the Chicago Fire**



# Personal Experiences

## During the Chicago Fire

1871

*by*

FRANK J. LOESCH

*of the*

Chicago Bar

CHICAGO  
PRIVATELY PRINTED  
1925

**Copyright, 1925  
by  
FRANK J. LOESCH**

**Printed in the United States of America**

**A**S this is a purely personal narrative, names of other persons with whom the author came in contact from time to time during these experiences have been omitted as of no historical value to readers.



## Personal Experiences During the Chicago Fire

**O**N October 8th, 9th and 10th, 1871, a fire swept out of existence the entire business district of the City of Chicago, located mainly on the South Side, virtually the entire residence and business districts of the North Side, blocks of many handsome and comfortable residences on the South Side and a goodly number of homes and business buildings on the near West Side. Over two hundred people lost their lives, and of its three hundred thousand inhabitants one hundred thousand were rendered homeless, of whom I was one. The money loss was over two hundred million dollars. The land devastated covered an area of over two thousand acres.

I had been a resident of Chicago for sixteen months and in that time had made myself familiar with its business and residence districts and its topography. I lived, at the time of the fire, in a boarding house at 110 North Dearborn Street, now 548 North Dearborn Street, one door south of Ohio Street. I was a bookkeeper for the Western Union Telegraph Company at its main office which was located at the northwest corner of Washington and La Salle Streets. The building now situated there, known as the Merchants' Building, excepting some recent interior improvements, is a replica of the one which was destroyed by the fire.

The summer of 1871 was an intensely hot one. No rain had fallen in the Lake region for about three months prior to October 8th. Great forest fires with large loss of life were taking place in the then heavily pine-forested regions of Central and Northern Michigan and Wisconsin. I recall our excitement on Saturday and Sunday, October 7th and 8th, on reading in the morning papers stories of the destruction of forests and villages, with the loss of many lives, about Sturgeon Bay and other places in Wisconsin and Michigan.

As is generally known, the residential portion of Chicago was almost wholly constructed of wood. Brick and limestone structures were largely confined to the South

---

Read before The Chicago Literary Club, Oct. 12, 1925.

Side business district. South of that were many handsome residences with Joliet limestone fronts and brick side walls. Such was not the case on the North and West Sides where the common structures, by the mile, were the one-story basement frame cottages with outside front steps leading to the upper floor. It is needless to state that there were many handsome homes in the district north of Indiana Street (now Grand Avenue), east of Clark Street and south of North Avenue.

The streets, where paved, were generally so with the so-called Nicholson blocks, round pine blocks laid upon hemlocks planks and heavily tarred over with a surfacing of torpedo gravel which in a short time was either ground into the soft pine blocks or swept away by the wind and rains.

The sidewalks, except in the South Side business district, where limestone flags predominated, were entirely of pine or hemlock planking and many of the streets were raised on wooden supports from four to ten feet above the natural surface to meet the street grades which had by that much been raised above the natural surface. It can be seen what added fuel to a general fire was made by such construction of sidewalks and street pavements. The raised portions of the streets were sustained by heavy stone retaining walls on each side.

As there was little of grade uniformity in the sidewalks on some of the side streets, it was a real exercise to go up and down the steps from one lot to another between the walks respectively at street and surface grade. I recall that on the North side of Indiana Street, between Clark and Dearborn Streets, in a distance of about three hundred feet, pedestrians were forced to climb steps up and descend three times, the natural and street grades being over six feet apart. As the street was unpaved and impassable for foot passengers most of the time by reason of mud or deep dust, one was forced to stick to the walk. All this to accommodate the selfish interests of owners of abutting lots who refused to bring their walks to the street grade. Sprains, bruises and broken limbs were common, due to such irregularity of sidewalks, especially in wintertime.

Before midnight of Saturday, October seventh, our household of about thirty boarders was aroused by cries of "Fire!" The sky was red from a southwesterly blaze. A number of the young men, including myself, started for the

scene of it and were stopped on the east side of the Madison Street bridge. From there we saw the destruction of the then Union Railroad Station, a frame structure, located on the East Side of Canal Street, opposite Monroe Street. South of Adams Street to Van Buren Street were located planing mills and lumber yards. The fire was fierce and spectacular with such material to feed upon, but there was no wind and the fire exhausted itself without crossing the South Branch of the river. That was the night before the beginning of the great fire. It brought directly home to us all the fire hazard the city was exposed to and little else was talked of on that Sunday. Everything was as dry as tinder from the long drouth and great summer heat.

Chicago had no Sunday theaters, and for amusement one had to resort to the German beer gardens or to the North Side Turner Hall, where good music was the rule afternoons and evenings. Therefore church attendance was much more general than it is now. I would say that Chicago was then a City of Churches. I attended many services in different churches and often found standing room at a premium on Sunday evenings.

As churchgoers were coming out of their places of worship on Sunday evening, fire bells were ringing furiously and a rapidly increasing red glare towards the Southwest Side indicated that another fire had broken out. A strong hot wind had been blowing from the southwest during the day and it seemed to have gained in strength at this time.

Few of our fellows at the boarding house cared to see another fire after being up most of Saturday night at the one just referred to. Therefore only two of us started out for the scene of the new fire. My companion was young LeRow, somewhat undersized, but exceedingly active. His enthusiasm to see the new blaze carried me with him. We made our way speedily to about Franklin and Monroe Streets. The fire had just leaped across the South Branch at about Adams Street. In that vicinity was located the gas reservoir which supplied the South and North Sides with illuminating gas. All about that neighborhood were many small cottages inhabited mostly by Irish people. The destruction of their homes was an immediate certainty. The possible explosion of the gas tank could not be long deferred. The frantic excitement among the people in their fear that they could not save their household goods was

most moving. With a sympathy but a heedlessness which neither of us could afterwards account for, in the imminent dangers about us, we helped as we could to move their goods into the street. They had better have been left in the cottages for almost as they were being placed in the street some began to smoke from the heat of the air.

The panic which paralyzes human faculties under conditions like that is illustrated by one instance. From one of the cottages a mother had carried into the street, of all things, a bed tick filled with straw, where burning brands were everywhere falling in increasing numbers, and rushing back brought out and dumped a pair of twin infants upon the straw tick and hastened back into her home just as LeRow and I dropped some household articles and noticed a burning brand fall into the straw tick. He grabbed one infant and I the other. We gave the babes to their frantic mother, urging her to run with them for their lives. As we started to run we noticed the straw tick ablaze. No houses had then begun to burn but most of the people joined us in getting away.

We stopped a few moments at the northeast corner of Monroe and Wells Streets to watch a scene there. Barrels of whisky were being rolled on skids into Wells Street from several large stores of dealers in beverages, presumably awaiting immediate cartage, though no drays were visible. However, what we did see was a number of men, each two or three with a scantling or piece of board ramming some of the barrels, and as soon as part of the head had been driven in and the liquor was gushing out the men would throw themselves flat into the street to gulp the whisky as it poured over them. No one interfered with their amusement. It is very likely that some of those men were among those reported "missing" later on.

There was no time to lose. The streets were being littered with burning brands. We ran east on Monroe Street to La Salle and north towards Washington Street. North of Madison Street we were literally running over a coating of red and smoldering fire brands. We saw no other people in that block. About half way in the block LeRow cried out that he was smothering. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him as fast as I could go to Washington Street where the air was free of smoke with few cinders on the street, but a strong hot wind was blowing

eastward and carrying many burning brands high in the air. Here LeRow revived and we parted, he to go north, I to go into the Telegraph Company's office to learn if I could be of service. Some three or four of my fellow clerks were there, besides the manager. Some one had opened the vault door, into which we put all the books of account that were about, the men having worked on them that day. Unfortunately the chief bookkeeper had been working all day in a private room on the fourth floor, on his September accounts and had left many of the books up there for the night. They were, of course, lost. I saw the manager place a lot of gold coins into a small portable office safe at his desk. It was suggested to him that we move the safe into the large vault but he declined to have it done as being unnecessary. After the fire the stack of vaults in that building was found upright amidst the debris of the rest of the building, the contents of each vault being intact, but the manager's safe had been melted down and after diligent search amidst the ruins there was found only a little trickle of gold in the shape of a thin vein over some bricks.

All salvage work in our office was being done by the light of the flames. The building opposite on Washington Street was ablaze and the roof of our building was burning. The telegraph operators had abandoned their instruments on the upper floors and were running down the stairway as I hurried into La Salle Street and ran north to Randolph Street.

The tunnel at that time and until the late Eighties, when it was turned over for the exclusive use of North Side cable cars, had a foot passageway on the east of the teamway. The teamway entrance near Randolph Street was then where it is now, while the foot passage entrance was at Lake Street, the descent being by a stairway to a boardwalk.

I stopped for a few moments at the north corner of Randolph and La Salle Streets to look about me. All the buildings south on La Salle Street as far as I could see, south of Washington Street, were ablaze. So were some north of it. My particular attention was, however, called to the Court House and City Hall. The former had for its center building a brown stone structure surmounted by a cupola in which was hung a large bell. The interior of

the building was burning and the flames being carried up through the open space had set the bell to ringing. Above all the sounds of the roaring fire, the wind and the excited shouts of a moving mass of people the bell whirled on its frame and over its stanchions, ringing out with a weirdness and a despairing clangorous volume, as though it were possessed of sense and were agonizing in its struggle against destruction. For many years thereafter the memory of its clangor often awoke me at night to recall the scene.

The east and west wings of the Court House were constructed of Joliet limestone—the west wing being the City Hall. I watched for some moments, with a fascination which only the growing danger to myself drew me away from, the effect of the fire upon the city hall. The strong southwest wind was driving the heat in sheets of flame from the hundreds of burning buildings to the west of it, upon the southwest corner of the building, with such terrific effect that the limestone was melting and was running down the face of the building with first a slow then an accelerating movement as if it were a thin white paste.

I stopped for a moment to give directions to the wife of the janitor of the Metropolitan Block, the building which was duplicated after the fire and recently wrecked to make room for the present Burnham Building. The woman had four small children and a well filled basket of food. She explained that as it was impossible to save any household goods and as children were always hungry she had decided to take only food.

The carelessness with which some people must have viewed the oncoming flames was evident to me when I saw numbers of guests rushing out of the Sherman House onto Randolph Street. Most of them were in nightclothing, carrying whatever other clothing came handiest in the panic. The Court House opposite must have been burning for over a half hour for it was now near midnight and yet those people had apparently waited, or were left asleep, until the hotel was about to burst into flames before deciding to leave.

I joined the rush of people passing up La Salle Street to the tunnel's pedestrian-passage entrance. Some time after leaving Monroe and Franklin Streets there was a loud explosion. I learned from the crowd making its way to

the tunnel that it was the explosion of the gas works. Gas lights had gone out everywhere and the escaping gas had doubtless hastened the action of the fire in many buildings. At any rate the tunnel was dark. As we entered it in pairs with a regularity that seemed as if it were a drill, each person put his hands on the shoulders of the person in front of him and with almost a lock step, with the slogan, "Keep to the right!" "Keep to the right!" "Keep to the right!" repeated sing song by almost everyone we emerged on the North Side at Kinzie Street. Strange to say that at the same time that a double line of us was walking north through the tunnel, a single line was going south in the same order repeating the same slogan. There was no panic, no crowding, only good humor and good order.

On reaching my boarding house I found Dearborn Street a mass of people and of horses and vehicles. It appeared like an aimless confusion but it was everyone looking out for himself and family without regard to others, and expecting others to do the same. It was exciting but not wildly panicky. We all realized that haste was necessary to get away somewhere out of reach of the flames which were shooting high above the blazing business district and by the light of which we were moving about inside as well as outside the houses, but frankly I saw no evidence of disregard of others' rights in the confused moving to and fro. There were more calm people than one would expect. Our landlady had bethought herself to examine every room a few moments before I returned, she told me, and found two young men sound asleep. I saw one of those two standing on the upper landing of the outer stairs, looking wildly toward the blazing South Side. He had on a dress vest over a long linen duster. His confusion of mind was not much greater than that of most of us later when it came to a question of what we wished to save and what we could save.

I found that most of the boarders were still in the house but were fast leaving with whatever they could carry. I found two, who, ignorant of the extent of the fire, still refused to believe that it would reach the North Side. At that time the air was literally full of burning embers, the wind being so strong that we saw pieces of wood two or more feet long in full blaze being driven northeastwardly.

Individuals and groups were concerned as to the direction to take in seeking to escape the oncoming flames. I joined a company of a dozen or more, broken into smaller groups later, who decided on going directly west on Ohio Street to as near the North Branch as we could get, thence northward toward Fullerton Avenue, then the city limits, which no one thought of as ever likely to be reached by the fire. Some of the others decided to go directly north into Lincoln Park. That was a bad choice. Others decided that they would go east on Ohio Street to the lake and be in safety on the beach which was very wide at that point. That was the worst choice. I recall a lady and her family taking that direction. When next I saw her she was minus much of her hair, eyebrows and eyelashes. They had been scorched off by the intense heat in spite of the fact that she sat in the lake and frequently ducked her head into the water.

In a very short time we had carried two trunks about three blocks west on Ohio Street and leaving two people to guard them, two returned to the house, threw two more trunks down the stairs and out into the street and carried them to the place where the others were guarded. We returned a second time for our books and carried some armfuls a block or two away and placed them alongside an alley fence.

During this time there was, of course, the greatest excitement on all sides as people were leaving their houses with whatever they could carry. The fire had now crossed the river and was making rapid progress on the North Side.

One scene took place, the relation of which will bring a sympathetic thought for an unknown book lover from all my hearers. I was on the walk in front of the boarding house when my attention was called to a gentleman who had a set of beautifully bound books in his two arms. He explained to an expressman that they were a set of Shakespeare and was asking him to take and move the books. He declined because he said he was trying to save his own goods. The gentleman then offered him \$50.00 to carry the books to a place of safety. This was declined on the ground that he must go quick to save his family. Then the gentleman said "won't you take and save the books if I make you a present of them?" "Yes," he would.

"Then take them," said the owner, as he put them into the wagon, turned away and burst into tears.

At our second return to the house there were few people in the immediate vicinity. I saw one man whom I knew as a leather dealer weeping bitterly as he stood at the corner taking a farewell look at the home he owned which was so soon to go up in flames, and while that saddened me, another incident gave me a hearty laugh. It was the sight of a man simply crazy rushing up Dearborn Street with a window blind under one arm but clearly under the impression that he was saving a valuable household article.

On my third return to the house no one but my roommate was there and to all appearances the street south of us was deserted. We agreed it was useless to try to save any more books and we left. We saw no one else south of us. I remained a moment longer, standing on the top of the outside stairway, and saw a sight which in vividness has never faded from my memory. The fire had crossed Kinzie Street some four blocks south of Ohio Street where I was standing. The roar of the flames, the air alive with flying embers, the fierceness with which the wind and fire combined were whirling the flames into and circling in and above the street, fascinated me. No voice could make itself heard above the roar. Even in the house we had to shout into each others' ears to make ourselves heard. As I came down the steps facing south, the three blocks south of Indiana Street caught fire with the suddenness of the explosion of a bomb, including the pavement and the sidewalks, and were a mass of flames in a moment. It was the first and only instance in which I saw an enveloping movement of the flames to that extent and especially the burning of the street pavement. The dryness of the season, the superheat for hours of the fiercely driven flames, the tarred-over pavement, were sufficient explanation to account for the street's burning, while the thousands of falling burning brands added to the other factors before mentioned easily explained how three blocks of buildings, including brick business buildings, could burst into flames at almost the same instant.

I was around the corner in a second after that and with overcoat collar up, sheltering myself from the heat on the north side of the building. It was now after one o'clock of Monday morning.

When I reached Clark Street the dense mass of people who had been moving up Clark Street for two hours or more had apparently not diminished in numbers although the fire was then burning only about three blocks south, but it was burning with a backward movement slowly towards the northwest. I use the word "slowly" in comparison with the terrific speed with which it was burning directly northeastwardly, of which I have just given an instance.

It will be understood that the force of the southwest wind was driving the flames in a straight northeast direction, the termination point so far as inflammable material was concerned being at about the pumping station at Chicago Avenue and present North Michigan Avenue. Every one should have felt, but did not, that safety in flight lay in keeping out of the line of the fire as indicated, by walking northward and branching off westwardly and northwardly as fast as conditions permitted. I have indicated that many people took to the lake, in the direct line of the fire. It was strange how indifferent we all were to the contingency of a sudden shift of the wind to the south or southeast, which would have caught thousands upon thousands of us in instant peril of our lives. But the dense, slowly moving mass of people on sidewalks and roadways hindered any free or fast movement east of Wells Street or south of Ohio Street. There were few moving teams in the roadway at this time.

However, the passing crowd had a puzzle nearly equal to that of "The Lady or the Tiger." On my first return to the house I noticed unusual excitement two or three doors south of Ohio Street on the east side of Clark Street. Making my way there I found my haberdasher, a Jew and a genial fellow, in the most frantic condition of mind and body. He was running to the rooms above and back again and inquiring about the fire and looking down the street at the oncoming flames and rushing upstairs and down again with inconceivable rapidity. I did manage to extract from somebody the information that a baby was momentarily expected upstairs, but not knowing the exigency, it was not entering the world with that expedition which the nervous father, physician and family in attendance expected of it. Their very excitement, it was said, proved a hindrance. The puzzle, therefore, was, would

the fire or the baby first come to that home? The passing crowd caught the state of affairs, took a humorous interest in it and were extending good wishes and "hopes for the best." I learned a year or two later from the father that "it" came first and was a boy. The mother was carried out of the house on a stretcher when the fire had actually reached the south end of that block.

At the northwest corner of Ohio and Clark Streets there was a hat and cap store. Every time I passed there I heard the proprietor invite every passer-by to enter the store and fit himself with a hat or cap without charge. His reiterated invitation shouted to the moving mass was: "They'll all burn up anyway. Make yourselves at home with a new hat free. No charge! Take what you want." Not a man or boy accepted the invitation during the four times I passed there. It was acknowledged with humorous good nature by the men but time was too precious, the fire was too dangerously close; one could not afford to risk the loss of his place in the moving mass and separation from family or friends for a new hat.

At Ohio Street many people turned west so that with those coming up La Salle and Wells Streets the crowd seemed no less on Ohio Street west of Wells than it did on Clark Street. It was more dense then than I saw it anywhere else. It was the best-natured mass of people I ever was in the midst of. The women were more sober-minded than the men. Losing a home was more serious to them, but endless badinage passed back and forth between the men concerning the suddenness and inconvenience of the moving and the ignorance of a destination or abiding place. I never heard a crying child except in one instance. The children as a rule considered it all a wonderful lark. I occasionally saw old people or sick ones being led or almost carried. On Ohio Street west of Clark Street everybody was carrying something, including babies, but most did as I finally did—left everything to burn and walked on with the feeling that we were lucky to escape with our lives.

Two of us men were puzzled as to what we should do with a woman standing in a dazed condition with only a nightgown on. She could not answer a question. While we were puzzling, the husband, in a wild state of mind, rushed up, lifted her into a single buggy standing at the

curb, placed himself between the thills and pulled away, not, however, with a trotting gait.

An Italian of middle age carrying a load of bedding on his back was crying lustily. On inquiry as to the cause he said brokenly, with great sobs, that he had lost his dog. Some one inquired if he had a wife and children. He replied that he had but had lost those too. To a jibe from someone as to his failure to cry over their loss, his answer was that they could take care of themselves but the dog couldn't, and he knew he had lost him forever. The uncomplimentary remarks of the refugees manifested their radical dissent from such unnatural feelings.

I saw two boys carrying a showcase filled with candy. One walking in front carried the case with his hands behind him. Both were crying softly. They had lost their family. I saw them the next day on the prairie west of McCormick Seminary, playing marbles, the candy all gone. I have regretted since that I did not inquire whether they had lived on that in the meantime, for there was little opportunity to trade it for more substantial food.

By the process of slow walking to Erie Street bridge where a considerable number of people waited for an hour or two, thence by a ride with an express man, a part of our group found ourselves at the east abutment of Chicago Avenue bridge about 4 a. m. It had a slight grade above the street. From it for two hours we saw the flames everywhere leaping upward but ever steadily making their way toward us. At one time we witnessed six churches, some of them with spires, sending their flames high into the air, making the most spectacular exhibition of the fire on the North Side. They included St. James Church, Unity Church which had two spires, New England Congregational Church, as well as one or two others, the names of which I cannot now recall. None was burning fast, it seemed to us, but it was an awesome as well as a depressing sight. They were the outstanding feature of the fire from our viewpoint for over an hour.

About 6 a. m. a number of us succeeded in inducing an expressman who was driving north to carry us to Fullerton and Racine Avenues, where some of the party had friends who had a comfortable home. We were welcomed in spite of the fact that about thirty other friends had already taken refuge there, and so many more recalled

that it might prove a place of safety that by Monday evening over seventy homeless people had gathered there.

As we drove up Larrabee Street and Lincoln Avenue, we found the residents out in force on the streets pitying us as we drove by with others in the same condition. In reply to questions we gave what information we could as to the extent of the fire. Not one person, to all appearances, was in the least personally concerned or seemed to have any idea of peril from the fire to *his* home. Yet about 3 o'clock that afternoon I walked down to North Avenue and from there looking down Larrabee Street and later Sedgwick Street, a distance of a half mile, saw only deserted streets. Not a human being was visible in that distance with both sides of both streets on fire at about North Avenue, the fire having extended further north on Sedgwick Street than on Larrabee Street.

I spent most of Monday after 10 a. m. in wandering about the district between North and Fullerton Avenues, a distance of a mile. The houses were being rapidly vacated north of North Avenue. The people had a better opportunity to remove their belongings or bury them than had those who were caught unprepared during Sunday night in the district south of Division Street. Many could be seen burying furniture. One musician told me some months after that he had so buried a fine piano only to lose it, as thieves had gotten it before he could return to his devastated home lot some days after the fire.

The fire was burning steadily and rather rapidly northward without a hand anywhere attempting to stay its progress. It was plain to be seen and often commented on by the fire-dispossessed wanderers that three or four fire engines with hose connections and water could at any time after 10 or 11 on Monday morning, have prevented all progress of the flames north of Division Street or at least north of North Avenue. The engines could have been obtained. It only needed water but there was no water. The destruction of the Chicago Avenue pumping station early in the morning had ended all hope of ending the fire so long as there were houses, streets, sidewalks and fences to feed it and no rain to quench it. I saw the pavements burning with the same fury as houses and board walks.

The strongest impression made upon my mind next

after the burning of those thousands of homes was the long lines of vehicles loaded with goods and human beings and accompanied by files of thousands of homeless ones walking alongside. There was not the humor that there was in the earlier dispossessed ones. They were mostly headed west for Webster Avenue bridge over the North Branch. Those of us who had lost all our personal belongings were curious to note the mental agony and nervousness under which these later refugees were suffering in the fear the fire would yet overtake them. There were delays and halts in the endless, slowly-moving procession of vehicles and people. Whenever one such occurred a stream of profanity and curses issued from the drivers and even from pedestrians of such volume, variety and blistering malediction on those causing the delay, that I hope the world will never again hear its equal. It was due, of course, to the overwrought nerves and minds of every one suffering under hours of agony from loss of homes and personal property and fear for the lives of wife, children or parents.

Before sunset I had returned to my place of refuge. Some thirty or forty men had gathered there. At a council it was decided that active measures must be taken to guard our lives. In front and to the south of us and west of McCormick Seminary were some sixty to eighty acres of prairie, thickly covered with very dry thistles and grass. If the fire swept across that all our lives would be put in jeopardy. It was decided to find a team and plow furrows across that field as at least a partial protection.

The second protection was the tearing down of fences and uprooting posts which fenced in part of the prairie and throwing them into ditches where we could handily find them. The final precaution was the filling of many open kettles and pans with water from a well, and placing them so that in the emergency feared each woman and child for herself or itself, or some man for them, could soak a wrap, place it about the woman or child, the man throwing what water he could over his legs and then with his charge run the gauntlet of the prairie fire. The captain in command told me off with another lively young fellow as one of several pairs to kick off fence boards and pull out posts. It was long after dark when we got to work but it was exhilarating work as the night chill came on, and

kicking in unison we did great execution with the fences as well as to our legs and muscles. The hardest job was the pulling out of posts which caused lacerated hands, but no one murmured. We felt ourselves to be in a desperate situation. Our eyes were ever to the south, watching the steady coming on of the fire as it lapped up in flames street after street of houses.

About 1:30 o'clock on Tuesday morning when we had given up hope of any stay and when the last row of houses on Belden Avenue or the street south of it, next south of the prairie, was about being licked up, rain suddenly came down in such volume as to assure us safety and the extinguishment of the fire. Without more ado every man sought some place of refuge. I crept under an outside stairway to find just room enough to lie in amidst several other men who had forestalled me. I had not slept since early Sunday morning. I had had nothing to eat since Sunday noon, but I do not recall that I was either sleepy or hungry.

When I arose about daylight Tuesday morning I could scarcely believe the sight which met my eyes. The prairie which we had so worked over the evening before and which we had left tenantless was filled with a mass of refugees who had drifted there since 2 a. m. Some one of our crowd made a rough count and reported over three thousand men, women and children camped there. As I walked about I saw many whom I had earlier seen as refugees. Among others were the two boys and the janitor's wife with her four children. Every group seemed to be engaged in cooking breakfast. Judging by smell and sight I was of the opinion that the three staples which had been forehandily saved from the devouring flames were coffee, rye bread and sauerkraut. At my refuge a cup of weak tea and one biscuit was served to each adult. Immediately after that hearty breaking of a two days' fast, several of the men started for downtown to find out something of the conditions and what we could do about getting to work or leaving the city.

Our walk was down Lincoln Avenue to Clark Street, thence into Lincoln Park at Wisconsin Street to North Avenue. There were still many graves in the old cemetery south of Wisconsin Street which had been incorpo-

rated within the park limits. Not a wooden marker had escaped the flames while former granite and marble headstones were in evidence only by the chips left of them which littered the ground. Broken china was everywhere, plainly the remnants of household things which had been carried there for safety and then abandoned to the flames which swept the dry grass, shrubbery and trees out of existence.

We could note the line of trees along Clark Street abutting the walk, which had burned down to the soil. A former double row of Lombardy poplars which lined the roadway to the park from Clark Street and North Avenue northeasterly could only be traced by the blackened spots scarcely above the surface. There were only a few people about in the burned over district. There were no police, no militia and no soldiers. It was a desert—a universal ruin with here and there only showing a stone or brick remnant of the wall of a church or of some former substantial business building, where a big city of people had lived in general happiness only three days before.

In our walk south of North Avenue we were often non-plussed to identify the cross streets since former landmarks had been completely destroyed and where brick business buildings had existed they seemed to have fallen into the streets making piles of debris. The Ogden House occupying the present site of the Newberry Library stood out prominently wholly uninjured.

The rails of the street railway on Clark Street had almost without an exception been burned out of their ties and lay about the street and upon the former sidewalk space twisted and warped like dead black snakes in agonies of contortion. The paving blocks had been largely burned over and out and were often displaced, leaving holes in the street. The sidewalks and everything which was inflammable had been burned.

On Chicago Avenue a lot of water mains had been distributed before the fire. Sticking out of one of these we found the legs of a man who had been roasted to death in his place of refuge, probably blindly sought by him in a drunken stupor.

We were told that a few hours after we had left Chicago Avenue bridge and as refugees in vehicles and afoot were crowding over it in the face of advancing flames, a

small oil refinery near there caught fire, exploded and caused the death of over a hundred people by burning or by drowning in being crowded off the bridge or jumping into the river in the frenzy and agony of the crowd following the explosion.

On Dearborn Street not more than two hundred feet north of my late boarding place, we saw a gruesome sight. Only a day or two before the fire the son of the owner of a residence had recovered from an attack of typhoid and the tan bark had been removed from the street. The body we saw, as we learned afterwards, was the father of the sick boy. With a blind fatalism which can not be explained, after the man had gotten his son and family to a place of safety he had returned to the house determined to save it. To that end he got out the garden hose, wound it about his body and turning on the water undertook to put out burning brands as they fell, until a whirlwind of fire burned him to death. His right hand held the nozzle. The marks of the hose burned off were plainly discernable over his back as he lay on his face burned to a crisp.

Of my former boarding place nothing was left, even the bricks having largely been pulverized by the heat, and buried treasure of silverware was afterwards found melted to a shapeless mass.

I met there our next door neighbor's wife. They owned their home. She had lost eyebrows and eyelashes and her hair was singed. Her story was a strange one. Her husband was downtown trying to save what he could out of his Sherman House Barber Shop. With the fire drawing near, she felt that her canary bird would lose its life when exposed to the great heat, if she undertook to carry it with her. She therefore decided to remain in the house and be burned up with it and her canary. At the last moment as she saw the flames a few doors away, her courage failed and with a heavy wrap, without a hat, she dashed out, to find herself almost stifled by the intense heat, and could barely get around the corner without being suffocated. She was unaware of the loss of her hair until told of it by friends whom she found after hours of wandering northward.

As the bridges across the river had all been burned, I made for the La Salle Street tunnel, only to find that the

foot passageway was impassable because the flaming brands which had been swept into the south entrance at Lake Street had set fire to the board walk which was wholly consumed.

The brick walls of business buildings on both sides of La Salle Street north of Kinzie Street had fallen outward into the open space of the tunnel driveway. I joined a number of men who were making their way slowly over the debris of still heated bricks into the unlit tunnel through the Cimmerian darkness to daylight at Randolph Street.

The South Side was a mass of smoking ruins. I can recall only one building the walls of which remained standing to about full height. That was the First National Bank Building then at the southwest corner of State and Washington Streets where the Reliance Building now stands. It stood out like a monument above all the devastated business district, except that here and there could be seen a stack of vaults. That was the case at the Merchants' Building. After some difficulty I found only a few square feet of unbroken stone, and a warm stone at that, upon which I could sit amidst the ruins of my former business place and observe what was going on. I was there about an hour meditating on what course to pursue and what city I could go to. I had only two dollars in my pocket and had the impression that Chicago would, of course, disappear as a business place. I began to question my impression when I saw a score or more of men at work in the ruins of the Chamber of Commerce now replaced by the Chamber of Commerce Building at the southeast corner of La Salle and Washington Streets. They were actually removing debris smoking hot, preparatory to rebuilding. I was joined by two or three other of my fellow clerks, all of whom, however, were living out on the West Side. One of them had known nothing of the fire until late Monday morning.

While chatting over the supposed loss of our situations and considering what to do, a messenger sent to the ruins to look up any clerks who might gather there, informed us that the main telegraph office was at State and Sixteenth Streets where we were ordered to report at once as our services were urgently needed. The others decided not to go that day so I walked alone down South Clark Street to about Twelfth Street where I observed in a baker's window only one eatable article—an apple pie. Fearing

the price would be more than two dollars, I entered with some timidity to inquire. Finding the price to be only twenty cents, which I joyfully paid, my courage rose to the point of asking permission to eat the whole pie in the shop. This being courteously granted, I promptly disposed of said pie with no crumbs left and with remarkable mental results. I walked on with the most intense feeling of pride that Chicago would come back and I must stay right here.

On reaching State and Sixteenth Streets, a curious sight met my eyes. The telegraph headquarters were in a brick warehouse on the northeast corner of those streets. The sidewalks were nearly four feet above the street grade. There were no desks or counters in the temporary offices, only boards laid across barrels, behind which the clerks stood to receive telegrams. As telegrams could not be written there, senders of them were standing in the street and using the sidewalk as desks. From Fifteenth to Sixteenth Street and for a half block on Sixteenth, men were standing as close as they could and use elbow room, writing telegrams. I joined the company and wrote mine, then reported for duty. I was placed behind a couple of barrels with a board over them as a receiving clerk, with instructions to accept every telegram offered without exacting any toll, and to note thereon that it was sent free on account of fire.

So great was the necessity of getting information out to anxious relatives that no telegrams whatever were being taken from other places, all the operators, all wires and facilities being devoted to sending telegrams out of the city.

I sent a long telegram to my father in Buffalo, assuring him of my safety and that of more than a score of former Buffalonians whom I had met in my wanderings. For years after I was gratefully told of the relief which that telegram brought to many families besides my own, as my father and brother went from family to family with the good news of personal safety, at least, of the homeless people.

A hasty consignment of food had been rushed from St. Louis by the telegraph officials. So far as I shared in it that afternoon, it consisted of a liberal allowance of apples and cheese which, in the slang of one of our hungry crowd, was good enough such as it was, and plenty of it as far as it went. The next day rye bread was added to the menu. The only drinking water I had

had in three days was from the well of our host. Water for ablution was out of the question. There was no water to drink at the telegraph headquarters until Wednesday and then it was unfit. It was turbid water bailed up from the lake shore. Our thirst was assuaged by beer and we could never get enough of that at five cents per glass. If it was abundant in the saloons across State Street immediately after a beer wagon had discharged its cargo, the price was five cents; as it became scarcer the price rose to ten cents, and then to the famine price of fifteen cents. As the price rose we endured parched throats as best we could until reports reached us of a renewed supply of the beverage when, regardless of the demands of business, there would be a rush of officials and clerks alike to take advantage of the abundance and normal price to quench our, by that time, consuming thirst.

Before dark I was excused from duty and walked through the five or more miles of ruins to my previous night's refuge. Preparations to leave were being made by all the people who had not already gone. Two of us before midnight came down to the Chicago and North Western Railway station at Wells and Kinzie Streets. It was an eerie walk down Lincoln Avenue to Wells, thence south to the station, over three miles. The night was pitch dark. Most of the distance on Wells Street south of Wisconsin Street had been built up with frame cottages. The street was several feet above the natural surface of the lots. The owners had laid in their winter's supply of anthracite, then substantially the only coal used for domestic heating and cooking. Each of those coal piles had taken fire and was burning. There were many hundreds of them. The intense blackness of the night, the heat from the burning coal, the blue flames now bursting into little spurts of red, the crackling of the coal as lumps were splitting up, the unexpected glare of a sudden high spurt of red fire, the complete silence except the noises referred to, the absence of any other human beings in the entire distance traversed, made a nearly speechless walk as well as a fearful one, and I, at least, had the feeling that the fires of hell were about us and the imps of Satan waiting amidst them for unwary victims. Could Dante have experienced such a night he might have added further terrors to his Inferno. Our relief was intense

when we boarded the train for a nearby suburban town, and as fire sufferers were given a free ride.

The next morning found me back at my temporary desk with old Chicago only a memory, but with high hopes for the new and greater Chicago which every ambitious young man was already convinced would surely rise out of the ashes of the old one. Looking backward over the past half century, we see that those hopes have been more than justified, and that the city of today with its motto, "I Will," exceeds in accomplishments the visions of its then most enthusiastic prophets of future greatness.

FRANK J. LOESCH

10 South La Salle Street,

Chicago, October 12, 1925.



Images Processed by Gary Brin  
Copyright © Nancy Hanks Lincoln Public Library

**NANCY HANKS LINCOLN PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
**Historical Book Collection**



# Nancy Hanks Lincoln Public Library

---

NANCY HANKS LINCOLN PUBLIC LIBRARY  
Historical Book Collection